

Vietnam: Anchored in Memory

For almost a decade, thousands of young American men and women gave up the pursuit of their everyday lives in exchange for military service in Vietnam. For them, and for their families, those experiences are forever anchored in their memories.

Philosophers, historians, and others have long speculated about what motivates ordinary people to give up their daily pursuits and put themselves in harm's way, often in the cause of defending people they do not know in lands far from their houses and loved ones. What moved these typical Americans to put their lives on the line? Of course, some were drafted. For others, perhaps it was peer pressure, idealism, adventure, a sense of duty. These and other complex motivations must have been running through the minds of the career military, reservists, and draftees as they trekked through fetid jungles swamps, bobbed in sun-baked waters, or roared through trackless skies.

From all walks of life they came, with a rich diversity of rational, ethnic and religious backgrounds. These young men and women found themselves bound together by their experiences with mankind's most primal test of personal courage and commitment, the act of war. The bonds formed under those desperate conditions have been severely tested. They are bonds formed under the desperate conditions have been severely tested. They are bonds that are now proudly shared.

In the years since that generation of Americans returned home, they have worked hard to remake those experiences forged in the crucible of battle and use them to take their rightful place in a nation now united in the ideas for which they fought. The world has become a safer place because of the sacrifice they made. The rich bounty our society now offers to so many of our citizens and to people around the globe is available, in large measure, because those veterans went through their personal trials by fire. Many of them emerged with leadership and other qualities this nation needs as we enter a new century which promises prosperity and peace.

Vietnam conjures up different memories for the veterans who served there. These memories collectively help make up our national identity and define us as a nation. By honoring the sacrifices they make, we ensure that each veteran is remembered with dignity and respect. They have become anchored in the memory of a nation.

